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SUBJECT: Darfur: North Darfur Violence against Women Campaign

¶1. Summary: With the deteriorating security situation in Darfur, women and children are increasingly the victims of rape and abuse. Sudanese Government representatives admit the social and educational marginalization of women, especially internally displaced persons (IDPs), but deny the worsening situation. Despite a Darfur-wide UN campaign with local government participation, called "16 Days of Activism" to publicize gender-based violence (GBV), it is unlikely to result in improvement in cooperation from local government or police bodies. End summary.

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North Darfur Violence against Women Campaign  
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¶2. Yousif Kibir, Wali of North Darfur, opened a two- week campaign against GBV in late November. Kibir called for eliminating violence against women and supporting women's organizations and associations in North Darfur. He requested that armed groups shield women and children from violent conflict. The Government of North Darfur and the United Nations Population Fund coordinated the November 25 opening ceremony. The nearly 500 participants included women leaders from El Fasher, Kabkabiya, Kutum, Um Kadada, and Mellit; NGOs; legislative council members; and SLA representatives.

¶3. The Wali's advisor on Women's and Children's affairs, Fawzia Abbass, noted that levels of GBV are higher in areas of Darfur with violent conflict, as armed groups act with impunity against civilians. She also noted the long-term physical and psychological harm and damage to social structures resulting from GBV. Abbass called for police, military, and government bodies to cooperate in ending violence against women. She highlighted a campaign to take place through December 10 that includes seminars, lectures, visits to the IDP camps, and various awareness raising and training programs.

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Contrasting Viewpoints on GBV  
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¶4. Women in the three Darfur states lag behind the rest of Sudan in literacy and education, Abbass told Poloff on November 28. She urged the international community not to impose its cultural values in sensitive areas such as reproductive health, but to accept Darfurian women's specific requests for assistance.

¶5. Abbass noted that security was bad in the IDP camps, and the risk of rape increased as firewood availability dropped around the camps and surrounding villages and women ranged further in search of firewood. Abbass said that the AU had originally cooperated with local police to provide protection for firewood patrols at the three camps around El Fasher, but these patrols had since ceased. However, she noted that entrepreneurs were now bringing firewood into the camps and fuel efficient stove initiatives were also reducing the need for firewood patrols. Curiously, Abbass then argued that the situation for women has improved, and the number of cases of violence against women is decreasing. She said that the number of cases reported in police stations in 2004 was approximately 3500, while the number of cases reported in 2006 was 235 cases, indicating an improvement (Comment: These figures do not correlate to any previously recorded. The decrease in reporting cases to the police is perhaps more an indication of the lack of trust in the willingness and/or effectiveness of the police to respond, as opposed to an actual decrease in the number of cases. End comment.)

¶6. In direct contrast, Zahra Muniem, Member of the Gender Expert Support Team during the Abuja negotiations and currently working for the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Sports, said, "The security situation is deteriorating in the camps and the number of gender-based violence cases is rapidly increasing." She noted that the Sudanese Government "continues to deny the issue and hide the facts." Zahra claimed that the Sudanese Government routinely harasses local and international NGOs working on women and children's issues and hampers assistance to victims of sexual assault.

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...and on Politics in Darfur  
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¶7. Abbass said SLM/M factions are highly committed to the cease-fire agreement, and violent attacks are caused by the NRF, which prevents IDPs from returning to their villages. Abbass expressed hope that all armed groups reach a cessation of hostilities, noting that she had heard that SLA/AW and SLA/AS had been involved in negotiations towards signing the DPA. She added, "women support peaceful settlement to the conflict, and do not support the deployment of any additional troops of any kind to Darfur." She urged the international community to play a substantial role in convincing non-signatories to join the peace process.

KHARTOUM 00002926 002 OF 002

¶8. Muniem was skeptical of the Sudanese Government GBV campaign, saying, "conferences aren't solutions." She noted that the North Darfur government committee on the protection of women had not investigated a single case of GBV over the past eight months. During a speech at a November 30 conference, Muniem decried the small percentage of women and opposition political parties in government. Despite a 20-year career working on women's issues in local government, Muniem, as an Umma party member, is excluded from government-sponsored conferences and committees on Q{QQeQry6women IDPs' participation in the DPA process.

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